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Douglas J. Macdonald

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REVIEW ESSAYS

CLASSICAL MASTERS

Douglas J. Macdonald

Handel, Michael I. *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*. New York: Frank Cass, 2001. 482pp. \$57.50

Michael I. Handel, Philip A. Crowl Professor of Comparative Strategy and a member of the faculty of the Strategy and Policy Department, Naval War College, passed away in June 2001. An internationally recognized expert on, and interpreter of, the thought of the German philosopher of war Karl von Clausewitz, Handel also wrote on subjects ranging from Israeli politics to the role and behavior of weak powers in the international system. Published widely as a noted expert on intelligence and its role in decision making, he also was a practitioner of the art: he consulted with the U.S. military in planning the use of deception against Iraq in the 1991 DESERT STORM war. His role in that war undoubtedly saved allied lives.

Despite his many other practical and scholarly accomplishments, it was as an analyst of the military classics that Handel is most highly regarded. His third, revised and expanded, edition of *Masters of War: Classical Strategic Thought*

Douglas J. Macdonald is associate professor of political science at Colgate University. In 1998, he was a senior research fellow at the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo, Norway. He received his Ph.D. in international relations from Columbia University and in 1985–86 was the John M. Olin postdoctoral fellow in national security affairs at the Center for International Affairs at Harvard University. He is the author of Adventures in Chaos: American Intervention for Reform in the Third World (Harvard Univ. Press, 1992). He is currently writing a book on power and ideology in the Cold War.

demonstrates why. Like its earlier versions, it is a masterful analysis of disparate military thinkers from different cultures and military traditions, and even from different millennia, using a magnificently crafted comparative approach. Despite this cultural and temporal diversity, however, Handel makes clear in his introduction that his comparisons support the original thesis of the book—“that the logic of strategy and waging war is universal rather than parochial,

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cultural, or regional.” In this, he largely succeeds. Handel argues compellingly that, despite the variations of time, culture, and space, the underlying logic of the situation facing any military planner is essentially similar in many respects. Thus he suggests, for example, that Clausewitz and Sun Tzu should be read as complementary rather than opposing texts, although they wrote some two millennia apart. This synthetic approach consistently bears fruit as one proceeds through the text. Handel was one of the few scholars with the intellectual and historical erudition to carry this ambitious goal off successfully.

In Handel’s analysis, naturally enough, Clausewitz leads the way. The treatment of this crucial body of work is creative and forceful, never hesitant to interpret boldly, and this third edition of *Masters of War* has considerably more varied citations than earlier versions. In such a comprehensive treatment, readers are sure to choose some areas to praise over others. This reviewer especially valued Handel’s sophisticated and nuanced treatment of Clausewitz’s dialectical method, which sometimes is overlooked in other works. As Handel makes clear, Clausewitz was a product of the German intellectual world, which was experiencing one of the most creative periods in philosophy in a single nation in modern times. When one thinks of nineteenth-century German intellectual life, one does not immediately recall literary figures or scientists but philosophers—Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Marx. This was a deeply philosophical society that saw itself as carrying out (in H. L. Mencken’s memorable phrase) “most of the world’s painful thinking.” Within that context, Clausewitz as philosopher of war could not have been untouched by the leading philosophical currents of his time; indeed, these figured as prominently as the practical example of the Napoleonic Wars in the formulation of *On War*. In this respect, it is necessary to mention the influence of Hegel.

Although some scholars, such as Peter Paret, have found the links between Hegel’s and Clausewitz’s systems of thought tenuous, the “ideal type” of method of thought used by Clausewitz and analyzed by Handel owes much to the Hegelian method of thesis-antithesis-synthesis (see especially Handel’s discussion in chapter 13 and appendix C). Somewhat curiously, Handel does not openly acknowledge Hegel’s influence specifically in this regard. Perhaps he wanted to keep controversy over intellectual “influence” out of the way in his analysis of the universal value of Clausewitz’s thought, or to avoid having to introduce the reader to the idiosyncratic and dense philosophical vocabulary that, at least in translation, has made Hegel’s thought almost impenetrable to all but the most dedicated reader. As good as Handel’s analysis is without this intellectual context, its inclusion might have allowed us to see Clausewitz not simply as a philosopher of war but as part of a broader philosophical movement that helped shape his extraordinary work. As Paret has noted, one can make too much of the

similarities of these intellectual currents, but they nonetheless exist. Handel's excellent analysis repeatedly, yet implicitly, demonstrates this point.

The "Master" in the title *Masters of War*, of course, is plural. Handel's comparisons of the works of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu are nothing short of brilliant. In particular, the imagined answers that one writer might give to challenges from the other are creatively presented in appendix C, where *Masters of War* reaches its creative best.

Sun Tzu is one of the most influential military writers of all time, *The Art of War* having been written some 2,400 years ago. Yet it had basically been overlooked by the English-speaking world until the 1960s, when interest in Mao Zedong (formerly rendered "Mao Tse-tung") and his theory of guerrilla warfare led to a seminal translation by the late American Marine Corps general Samuel B. Griffith III. It has always been enormously influential in Chinese military thought; not only did Mao Zedong constantly refer to the work, but Jiang Jieshi (formerly "Chiang Kai-shek") reportedly had a rare collection of commentaries on Sun Tzu going back centuries. Sun Tzu strongly influenced Japanese military thinking, and Ho Chi Minh personally translated the work into Vietnamese for training his officers and troops. It is not going too far to suggest that Sun Tzu is to the Far East what Clausewitz is to the West.

Yet as Handel makes perfectly clear, *The Art of War* is far more than a cookbook for would-be revolutionaries or those who oppose them. It is a profound work on the art of war itself, and its concentration on the moderating effects of the practical and factual in war offers a fine complement—this is Handel's word; a more ardent critic of Clausewitz might say antidote—to Clausewitz's tendencies, at times, toward abstractions and theorizing in the German philosophical fashion. Here again, dealing with these two masters, Handel's synthetic proclivities yield extremely creative theorizing. His analysis of "attacking the enemy's plans" (Sun Tzu) and the "center of gravity" of the enemy's army (Clausewitz), or, as Handel puts it felicitously, of "Eastern Psychology and Western Mechanics," is brilliantly conceived, and clearly the best work on the subject that this reviewer has ever seen. In this sense, Handel's work itself is clearly creatively synthetic. I finished the chapter wishing for much more such analysis from Handel, and deeply saddened that there will be no more.

Other classical masters, of course, are also included, ranging from Thucydides to Machiavelli and Jomini, and there are briefer treatments of more recent analysts. Only the choice and elevation of one "theorist" raised questions in this reviewer's mind—Mao Zedong. Mao's military thought is highly derivative of Sun Tzu's; his principles for guerrilla fighters often borrowed from Sun word for word. Although he claimed also to have studied Clausewitz, there is precious little evidence that he did so in any systematic way. (Mao in fact once claimed to

an American sympathizer to have been influenced by the military thought of George Washington. But this was undoubtedly prompted by his desire to appeal to Americans politically in the 1930s rather than to assert real intellectual influence.) There is no doubt that Mao deserves respect and study as a military “practitioner,” but I remain unconvinced that he is in the same category as Sun or Clausewitz, or the others included here, as a military “theorist.”

These are minor quibbles on a major work of military and philosophical analysis, and all of them can and should be challenged. This is what *Masters of War* accomplishes admirably: it makes the reader think more deeply about problems, and that is the fundamental purpose of scholarship. Michael Handel has left us a comprehensive scholarly legacy of the first rank. *Masters of War* will undoubtedly remain a cornerstone of that legacy, for the specialist or the student. He has also left us with the great gift of creative “painful thinking” on the art of war that can only grow in importance in the troubled times ahead. As *Masters of War* makes abundantly clear, the best of such thinking is timeless.